

Knowing and Loving  
I Corinthians 8:1-13  
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I read a fascinating book recently called “The Know-It-All.” The author, A. J. Jacobs, set out to read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica, all 33,000 pages of it. He read it from a-ak – an ancient East Asian music form – to Zywiec – a town in south-central Poland – and wrote about the experience. The subtitle of the book was “One man’s humble quest to become the smartest person in the world.” I don’t know if he achieved that objective, but I’m sure he’s a lot smarter than when he started out.

And that’s a good thing, right? Becoming smarter is a commendable goal for us. In fact, much of our lives are spent doing just this – trying to get smarter. Why else would we send our kids to school for 12 years, then off to college for another four or five or six? The more degrees you have, the more letters you have after your name, the more you are rewarded. Knowledge is power. We revere intelligent people and make fun of not-so-intelligent people. A smart person is “in the know” or looks at someone “knowingly.” Knowledge is a good thing.

If you read this passage from Paul in I Corinthians too quickly, you might think Paul is running an anti-Mensa campaign. “Knowledge puffs up,” Paul says. Or as the Living Bible translates it, “Being a know-it-all makes us feel important.” Paul says the person who thinks they know something doesn’t really know what they think they know. In other words, the more you think you know, the less you actually know about what you should know. What do you think about that? Should you know or not know? You know what I think? I don’t know.

Paul is not arguing here against being intelligent. He’s not condemning the kind of knowledge one gets from reading the Encyclopedia Britannica or watching “Jeopardy.” Instead, he’s condemning knowledge that makes the knower feel superior or arrogant, which was an issue in the church in Corinth. That church was an affluent congregation made up of some of the Corinthian upper class. When Paul started the church, he preached about the freedom that belief in Christ brought the believer, and some of the Corinthians were taking that to an extreme. They acted as if they were free to do whatever they wanted without considering the consequences for others, especially those who weren’t as intelligent or sophisticated as they were. They were basically practicing spiritual elitism.

The presenting problem here was eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Now, I know our world today presents us with a lot of moral dilemmas. Do I fudge a bit on my taxes? Is it OK to lie to my boss? How many chocolate chip cookies can I eat before I am considered a glutton? But I’m guess that you don’t sit around all day wondering if that Whopper you just ordered was originally a sacrifice to Zeus or Thor. Eating idol meat probably doesn’t make our top 100 list of spiritual dilemmas, so this passage may appear irrelevant to us.

But it’s not. There is truth for us in this passage, just as there is truth for us in every passage in the Bible. You may be tempted at times to discard a part of the Bible because it doesn’t seem to have anything salient to say. To that I would answer, “Come to Bible study!” We’ve been studying Deuteronomy, which could at first glance be

considered insignificant to our Christian faith. But there is truth in there, just as there is truth in this passage from Paul. Nothing in the Bible is irrelevant. Some of it just needs more interpretation and contextualization than others.

Here's the deal with idol meat. Worshippers were required to sacrifice the best animals to their gods, which means the choicest cuts of beef started out as sacrifices. Some of that meat was burned on the altar, some was eaten in a temple feast, and the rest was sold to local butchers in the marketplace. If you bought a leg of lamb or rib roast, that meat could have started out as an offering to a pagan God.

For mature Christians, this wasn't a problem. They knew the others gods didn't exist, so the source of the meat didn't matter. But many fledgling Christians grew up with pagan religions and still strongly associated meat with idolatry. For the mature Christians – those “in the know” – this was a non-issue. But for the spiritually weak, eating this meat was akin to committing a sin.

We have our own forms of this controversy today. We don't deal with issues related to idol meat, but we do have religious conflicts around things like whether Christians should drink alcohol, dance, gamble, cuss, watch R-rated movies, read “Harry Potter” books, celebrate Halloween, and so on. And we don't have the benefit of Paul writing us a letter saying, “You can read ‘Harry Potter,’ but you must not watch reruns of ‘Bewitched.’” So we Christians are left to work these issues out for ourselves, and in case you didn't notice, we don't always do this peacefully or come to the same conclusions.

So what Paul tells us here is that when there is disagreement over a non-essential issue, love trumps knowledge. Eating idol meat or watching “Die Hard” or doing the Macarena isn't a matter of life or death for our faith. Through Christ, we have been freed from legalism and oppressive restrictions. But just because we know it's OK to do certain things doesn't mean we should do them. Love trumps knowledge.

When Sydney was a toddler we loved to take her to play miniature golf. She always won, because her technique was to hit the ball once, then pick it up and drop in the hole. She got a hole-in-one every time, and each time she did this Leigh and I would clap and make a big to-do over it. Now, being the competitive, law-abiding person I am, I could have scolded Sydney and told her the correct way to play miniature golf. I could have given her a two-stroke penalty for illegally moving her golf ball when the “lift-clean-and-place” rule wasn't in effect. I could have had the teenager working the counter throw her off the course for cheating. And I would have been right.

But love trumps knowledge. When we are faced with a conflict over a spiritual or social issue, a wonderful guiding question to ask ourselves is, “In this situation, is it better to be right or to be compassionate?” In our efforts to show how much we know and provide what we believe to be the “correct” way of thinking, we may inadvertently become a stumbling block to someone else in their faith journey. I've heard well-meaning Christians bludgeon their opponents with arguments about why true believers speak in tongues or why real churches don't let woman serve in leadership. And I walk away thinking, “No wonder non-Christians don't like us!” There's nothing loving about trying to show everyone how “in the know” you are at someone else's expense.

I don't think many of us have to worry about that. If you're like me, you're much more aware of all that you don't know instead of all you do know. Even so, Paul has a word here for us, because even as we seek to learn more about Jesus Christ and our faith and the Bible – which is something we should never stop doing – what truly matters is

not what we know, but that we are known. In other words, I would rather be known by God through an intimate, personal relationship, than to be the smartest person in the world.

This has implications for how we live our lives and live out our faith. If we define ourselves by what we know, we run the risk of using knowledge as a benchmark for how we evaluate others. And in this affluent, highly intelligent area, we may be tempted to think that our knowledge gives us an advantage over people who don't have what we have. We may be tempted to use our knowledge to focus on what separates us.

But if we use love as our benchmark, then we are more likely to focus on our similarities instead of our differences. Puffed-up knowledge tells me I'm superior to people in certain neighborhoods or ethnicities or socioeconomic classes. But love tells me that I am a child of God, and they are a child of God, and that we are all apart of God's good creation. We are all in the same boat, and we're not going to get anywhere if I try to show that I can row faster than everyone else. We'll just end up going around in circles.

The truth is no one has a monopoly on the truth. No one truly knows. Some people may think they do, but Paul says that just shows how much they don't know. Later in I Corinthians, speaking about his earthly life, Paul says, "Now I know in part." But when he meets Christ face to face, he says, "Then, I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." We will do well if we strive to be fully known.

People don't need more knowledge. But they do need more love. So many people around us are stumbling through life. They don't need their theological doctrines corrected. They need a hand. They may not look like us, they may not live where we live, they may think differently than us, they may not be as far along on their spiritual journey as us. But there is so much more that connects us than divides us. Love trumps knowledge. I may not know much, but I know that.